Development Art for a Hypothetical Animated Adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's *'The Left Hand of Darkness'*

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Approval Sheet

The Design Project I titled '**Development Art for a Hypothetical Animated Adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's *'The Left Hand of Darkness'***' by Saumya Oberoi, Roll No. 18U130028, is approved in partial fulfillment of the Bachelor's Degree of Design (B.Des) at the IDC School of Design, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay.

Project Guide   Chairperson

External Examiner   Internal Examiner

Declaration

I declare that this project report submission contains my own ideas and work, and if any pre-existing idea or work has been included, the original author(s) have been adequately cited and referenced.

I also declare that I have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misinterpreted, fabricated or falsified any idea, data, or fact source in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and may evoke penal action from the sources.

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

'The Left Hand of Darkness' is a 1969 work of science fiction by American novelist and feminist icon Ursula K. Le Guin. The story is set on the frozen planet Gethen where one emissary, Genly Ai, must convince the governments to join the interplanetary confederation known as the Ekumen. The population of Gethen is androgynous and ambisexual; they are unique in the known universe, in this regard. Genly Ai struggles to bridge the cultural and personal gaps that arise from this, explored especially in his relationship with Estraven - a local politician who proves to be the only one to trust and aid Ai in his mission.

The aim of this project is to create a simulation of sorts where I'm able to pretend that I am one member of the art department of a mid-sized (with roughly 150-200 contributors) animated feature film production. Over the course of the project, I would aim to create a body of work that would be similar to what might be expected from a professional in the same position. The project is broken down into three phases of development: the first deals with digesting the text and involves research on both the medium of adaptation as well as the contents of the book. The second largely focuses on developing a reference for the visuals and structure of the adaptation, through moodboard and early concept creation. The final phase of the project involves the creation of artwork to guide the production of the hypothetical film; this largely focuses on character designs and key story moments between characters, but also involves some location and environment explorations.

The final output of the project is a compiled art-book that is aimed at an audience of production artists and pre-production designers from other departments (props, layout, and environment, for example). The art-book is expected to set the tone, provide explorations for media treatments, and provide animatable character designs that would not require much adjustment before being used in production.

In this project report, each of the three phases of development are discussed, and examples of my artwork and creative processes are provided. Additionally, included is a summary as well as a beat-by-beat plot breakdown for the benefit of those who have not yet encountered this book.

Final Output: Link

The final output of this project is viewable at the following link:
https://indd.adobe.com/view/3be3f53e-a16c-43f5-b9cb-20d88de0cc5c

The book can be downloaded as PDF from this link as well. While the book is designed to be viewed in 2-page spreads, on smaller screens it might be best to view the book as single pages for better legibility.
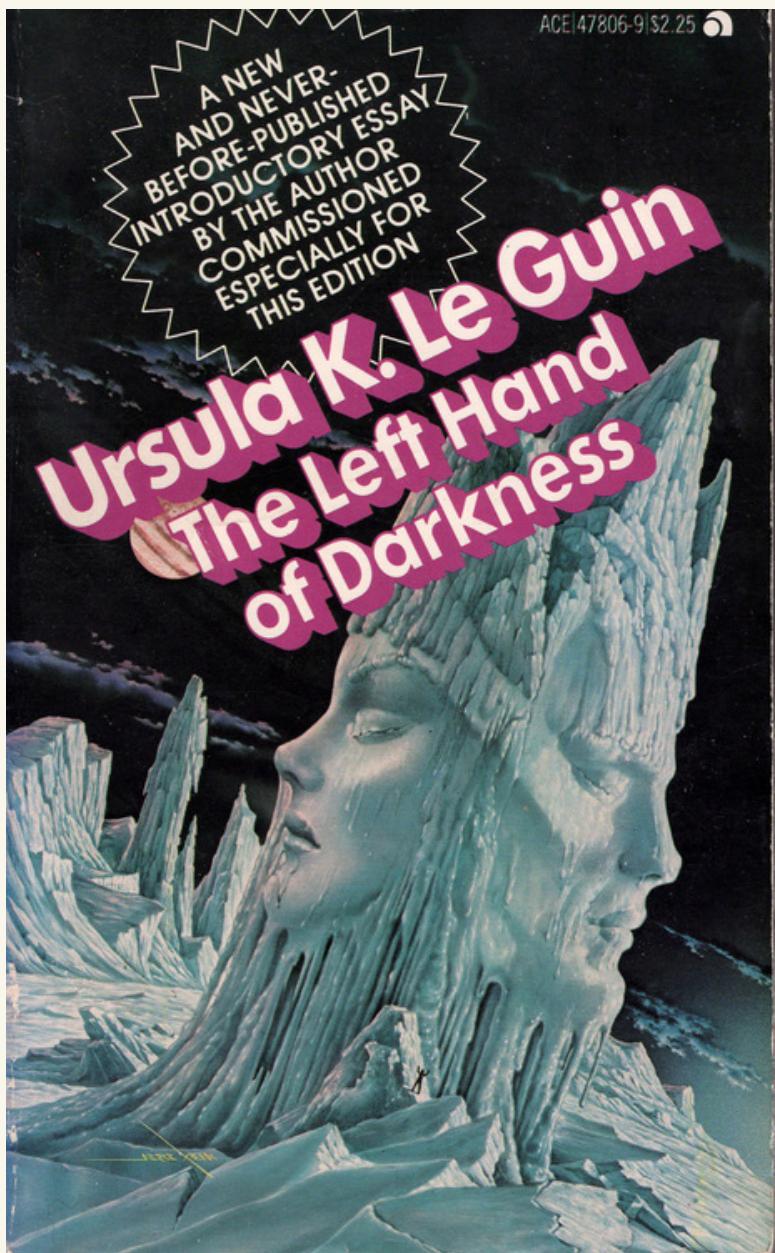
Introduction

Creating development art for the masterpiece that is Ursula K. Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness has been an enriching and satisfying experience, and a project I feel I could work on forever. In this introduction, I will describe my intent when it came to defining the bounds of the project, talk about what attracted me to the book (rest assured, not a section of this report goes by where I don't elaborate upon this) and finally, briefly discuss the structure of this project report.

This semester project, as I saw it, was a wonderful opportunity to design for myself a simulation of the industry I want to enter. My previous project, an animated short film, required me to fulfill every part of the pipeline from concept to final edit. This time, I wanted to jump to the opposite side of the spectrum, and focus as deeply as possible on a single part of the pipeline. In my project proposal, I articulated my motivations for choosing such a setup in the following words:

> *Art Department pre-production roles are dream jobs for me, and I want to challenge myself to produce work that helps me get closer to the level of these artists I admire so much. At the same time, a project like this would increase the amount of relevant work in my own repertoire for the kind of work I wish to do in the future (.....) Ultimately, this project is about chasing the best possible quality of work - both in depth and appeal - that I can produce, with the help of an iterative design process and regular, intensive, directed practice.*

The Left Hand of Darkness is a visually evocative science-fiction novel that is set in a richly inhabited planet, still within its Ice Age. Recommended to me by a friend, Anurag Soni, the book posed an incredible challenge in character design — the characters of this planet are ambisexual, and this notable aspect

of their biology is completely central to the plot. I've always admired Ursula K. Le Guin's talent of discussing strong themes with great nuance, nested cozily within a set of fascinating sub-themes that add wonderful body and depth to her work. Her painstaking detail enables me to imagine scenes vividly as I read them, and during the process of annotating the information in the book I discovered just how airtight her understanding of her created world had been.

Knowing then that I was in good narrative hands, I was able to focus on my own personal connection with the book. Though I've not lived in a cold climate for many years now, Le Guin's descriptions of the natural world of Gethen reminded me fondly of my childhood growing up in the cold northeastern states of the USA, where for almost 5 months of the year we would experience sights quite reminiscent of many of her descriptions of the world of Gethen, be they snowy coniferous forests or muddy sludge-filled streets. I was also, at the same time, reminded of the biting harshness of the cold, the warnings we were expected to heed as children to prevent losing fingers to frostbite, and the incredible relief of the warmth of the house. When Le Guin writes of the challenges of winter, I'm able to read it with a sense of familiarity that certainly plays a role in my attachment to the book.

 Very attractive to me too was the strange aesthetic that Le Guin employs in the novel — combining unmistakable markers of the western medieval and gothic worlds with technology developed by an intellectually robust race results in a beautiful but strange world that feels like a period-piece without actually being set in any kind of past — rather, in the distant future. The compelling study of the two contrasting nations of Karhide and Orgoreyn also drew me in, one unstable monarchy and one corrupt bureaucracy, both full of very real agents that drive the story rather than acting as just a backdrop. There are many, many things to love about the book, and I discover more each time I open it. Even now, after months of studying the book, I do not at all tire of re-reading it.

At the time of writing my project proposal. I studied the works of artists from the art departments of recent major animated productions (with a focus on Pixar's Luca) to understand the type of work that is the current industry standard. Among my referenced artists are the following:

Lighting Keys: Home - Ernesto Nemesio
Character Design: Gang Maria Yi
Set Design: ImageBlock Studio
Development Art: Chris Sasaki
Others:
Brett Allen Johnson
Angela Sung
Naveen Selvanathan
Owen Freeman

The work of these artists became a mental 'benchmark' for the project. While I would not try to imititate their art, I would aspire towards similar levels of polish.

The reason to choose to adapt a book also ties directly into the idea of simulating a studio environment as best as possible. While artists in development inject into their projects their own individuality and style, they are very rarely in charge of the stories or concepts themselves. Having a book to provide those may be similar to receiving a project pitch, and thus my duties as the artist would begin at delving deep into research and creating the best possible designs for my given role (be they characters and costumes, locations, or props).

In the coming sections of this report, I will first provide two summaries of the book: one short synopsis, and another beat-by-beat summary that focuses on all the major plot points of the novel. Following these, I delve directly into the processes I followed during this design project. Broken into three separate stages, I explain each in broad terms in the section titled Process Overview, before delving into each stage and its sub-processes in detail. I conclude with my reflections on the project.

Synopsis

A lone emissary by the name of Genly Ai travels to a distant, frozen planet named Gethen, with the mission to convince its governments to join the interplanetary confederation known as the Ekumen. The population of Gethen is androgynous and ambisexual: their unique biology makes it so that they are not male nor female, save for a few days once a month when they develop the sexual characteristics of either sex and become reproductively viable. Genly Ai struggles to bridge the cultural and personal gaps that arise from this, explored in great depth in his relationship with Estraven — a local politician, who Genly views with distrust for a long time, until Estraven becomes his only hope for survival.

Genly is viewed as a curio, a ray of hope, a pervert, and a threat. He struggles to understand the nuances of the politics of Gethen as he attempts to convince the governments of the existence of outside worlds inhabited by aliens — that is, people like him — and the peaceful will of the Ekumen.

At risk of assassination by order of the monarch in the nation of Karhide, Genly flees to the neighboring bureaucratic nation of Orgoreyn, where too his luck turns sour and finds him imprisoned in deadly conditions. The Prime Minister of Karhide, Estraven, is exiled from the nation upon punishment of death for his support of Genly's mission, though Genly has never been able to understand nor trust him properly thus far.

Rescued from imprisonment in Orgoreyn by an undercover Estraven, whom we discover to be a highly capable survivalist and an extremely intelligent soul, the two now find themselves with an impossible mission. Genly and the fallen politician must undertake a months-long journey, the kind undertaken in legends, across the great unhibated northern Gobrin Glacier; together, they brave the severest winter months in the uninhabited wilderness of a planet that is within its Ice Age. Over the months of their grand journey, Estraven and Genly grow close in an inevitable way; though at first awkward, that soon gives way and the two seem to become a single unit: able to speak to each other without ever opening their mouths.

By re-entering Karhide as a traitor, Estraven puts his life in grave danger and ultimately sacrifices it for the truest cause he has ever believed in — his desire to see his people advance and join the Ekumen. Genly is successful in his mission, and the nations of Gethen enter their Ekumenical Age amidst two collapsing governments. On his own, he struggles to come to terms with the experiences of the last two years and the loss of the alien whom he had come to love as his dearest friend.

Event-Wise Plot Summary

Parade in Erhenrang: an introduction to Genly Ai, Therem Harth (Estraven), Argaven (King of Karhide) and Tibe (future prime minister); our first look at the world, and Genly's situation as the Envoy of the Ekumen.

Dinner at Estraven's place: a first establishment of the relationship between the two main characters, the beginning of a snowballing effect resulting from a fundamental but unavoidable miscommunication.

Audience with the King of Karhide: Genly meets the king simultaneous with Estraven's expulsion, and spurring Genly's fleeing of the capital city Erhenrang post his unsuccessful attempt at convincing Argaven to join the Ekumen.

Exile and Foretelling: Estraven's unpleasant journey to Orgoreyn in a row-boat, simultaneous with Genly's journey to the Plains of Rer and his experience at the Fastness, where he witnesses a Foretelling event and learns about the Handdarata, the main religion of the Karhidish people.

Political Exposition: In Orgoreyn, Estraven is pulled out of the fish-houses in the markets of Mishnory where he had gained employment, by Commensal Yegey who (with Commensal Obsle) talks with Estraven regarding Genly and his mission. Tibe reveals his nature as a megalomaniacal war-mongering regent.

Genly's Travel to Orgoreyn: introduced to Ashe, Estraven's former kemmering, Ai receives Ashe's parcel for Estraven not yet knowing if Estraven lives. Genly undertakes a short and largely pleasant trip over the border to Orgoreyn.

The Foray: An attack on Siuwensin Commensality where Genly was hosted in Orgoreyn ousts him in the middle of the night; he is subsequently imprisoned for lack of identification papers due to bad circumstance. He is rescued from jailing the next day, once recognized.

Banquet in Mishnory: Hosted by Shusgis, Genly is introduced to the Orgoreyn government and officials during a banquet where he spots Estraven. In Karhide, Argaven's child dies within an hour of its birth.

Estraven's Warning: Estraven arranges a 'surprise' meeting with Genly, where he warns Genly to call down his starship as his life is in grave danger in Orgoreyn. Genly is reluctant to heed his advice, and distrusts him.

The Arrest: Genly fails to contact any of the Commensals after the abrupt cancellation of his reception function, and is arrested without explanation by the secret police; he is taken first for interrogation to Kundershaden prison, and then a long and harrowing ride as prisoners to a secondary location

The Farm: at the Pulefen Voluntary farm, drugged interrogations and the injection of hormonal concoctions meant for Gethenians along with improper protection against the cold cause Genly's health to steadily decline until he is near death.

The Escape: Estraven, in Orgoreyn, risks his life by disguising himself first as a fur trapper and then as a guard to break into the Voluntary Farm and carry a supposedly 'dead' Genly to safety. They move northward towards a prepared sledge, where Estraven uses his trapper disguise to get past Inspectors and into the woods. They rest and recover in a tent.

Plan for Departure: Genly must travel back to Karhide to avoid death and fulfill his mission. Estraven plots the route eastwards over the Ice, the Gobrin Glacier. It is wintertime, and the journeytime on foot is estimated at 4 months. Estraven has used his money from Ashe for equipment, clothing, and the sledge; he steals food for the journey from a nearby town in the night.

Departure: Genly and Estraven set off on their journey; they must make 12 miles a day in order to reach civilization again before their food runs out. At night they pitch camp and sleep.

The Great Journey: The two rek north through the forest, through active volcanoes, reach the edge of the Ice, spend days finding a way up, trek over the glacier, get stuck in blizzards and over rotten ice, and over the Guthen Bay. Genly teaches Estraven mindspeak, and the two become closer through a better understanding of one another.

Re-entering Civilization: A week later than their estimated end-of-journey, they spot the light of a town, Kurkurast, where they are provided warmth, shelter and food. Estraven avoids recognition, and the two rest and recover.

Travelling South: The duo slowly makes its way south through populated Karhide, from where Genly must reach Argaven while Estraven slips back to Orgoreyn undetected. Genly signals his ship to return. However, they are betrayed by a friend of Estraven's who had housed them; Estraven must flee immediately to the border. Genly watches as he is fatally shot, meters from the border between Karhide and Orgoreyn.

Second Audience: Genly, dazed, recovers in the royal sickroom and has his second audience with Argaven. He organizes the descent of his manned ship where 11 human members of the Ekumen land on Gethen. Both nations join the Ekumen, one after the other, as both governments collapse due to the unravelling of their lies.

A Fool's Errand: Genly, now employed within the Ekumen's embassy, travels to rural Estre and meets Estraven's parent and child in hopes of helping his own grief; the parent, Lord of Estre, wishes to hear the story of the crossing of the Ice, while the child wishes to hear of the Ekumen and the worlds beyond Gethen.

Minor Plots

The Place Inside the Blizzard: on suicide and the curse placed upon incestuous kemmerings
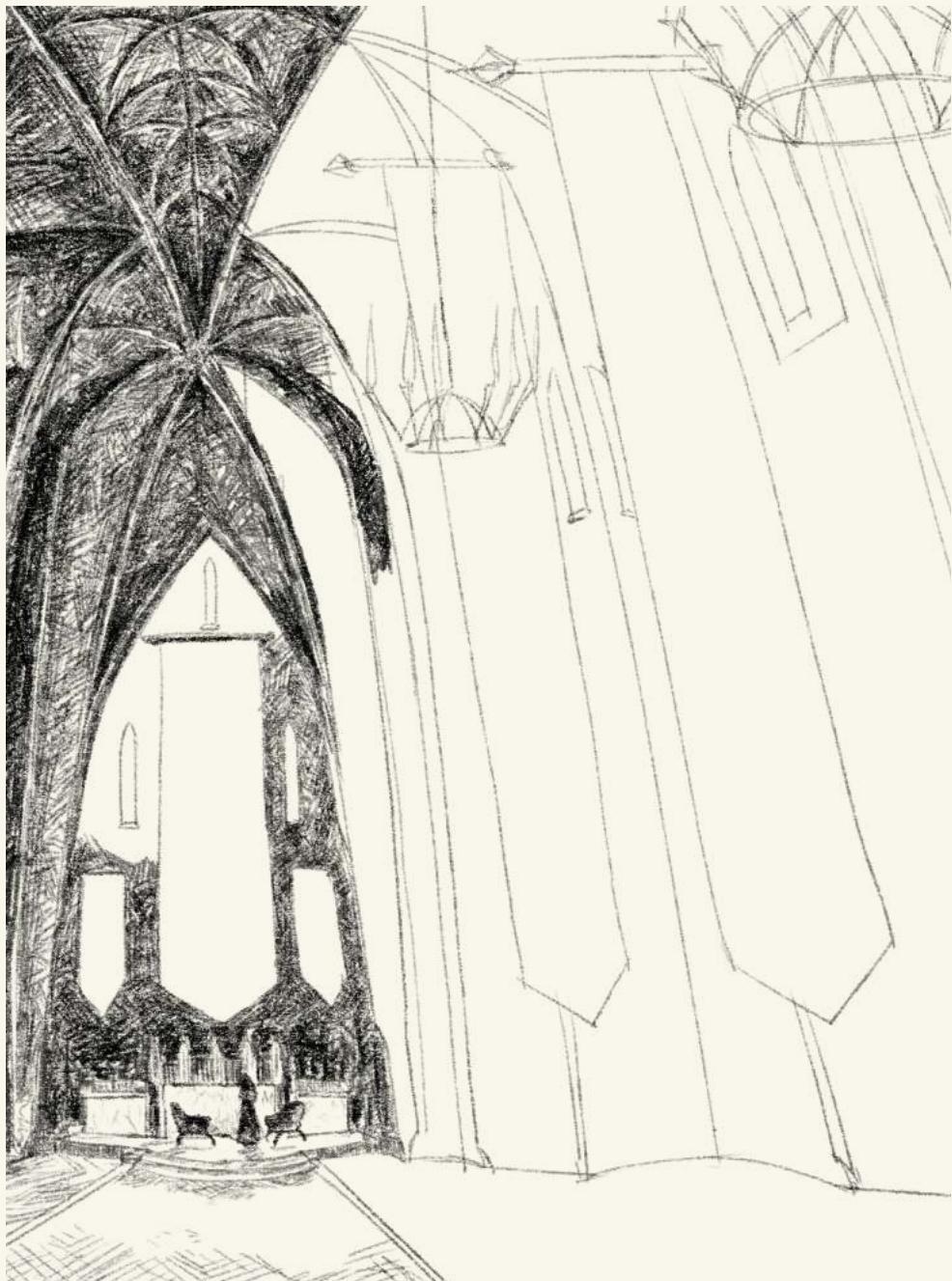
The Nineteenth Day: a tragic foretelling resulting from greed for unnatural knowledge, and the insanity sprung from it

Estraven the Traitor: the tale of the heirs of the villages of Estre and Stok centuries ago, and the ending of a generational feud

On Time and Darkness: a legend regarding the establishment of Meshe, a historical figure and object of divinity of the Yomeshta religion (a cult with a strong following on Gethen)

An Orgota Creation Myth: shards of ice create the world, and it is explained that men cast shadows because they were born in the house of flesh and are followed by death.

Process Overview

The process for this project has steadily evolved and built itself in real time, as I moved from objective to objective. Due to the ambitious nature of the project and the massive scope of the 300+ page book, I frequently found myself unsure as to what methods to employ to arrive at any sort of concrete results. The choices between paths were seemingly endless and the sheer volume of detail to be attended to could be paralyzing. It was in these times that processes suggested by my guide, Prof. Shilpa Ranade, brought clarity and allowed me to advance to the next stage of the project. Design requirements, such as character designs, were approached first experimentally, then iteratively, and finally went through a process of final refinement. Initial research was helped along with exercises such as the creation of a visual diary, studies of other adaptations, and the collection of a vast moodboard. What seem now like 'obvious' methods to pursue were at the time just a few out of many paralyzing options, and the gentle guidance at these crucial times in my project have both helped the results be far better and more comprehensive than they could have been otherwise, and taught me a great deal for all of my projects to come.
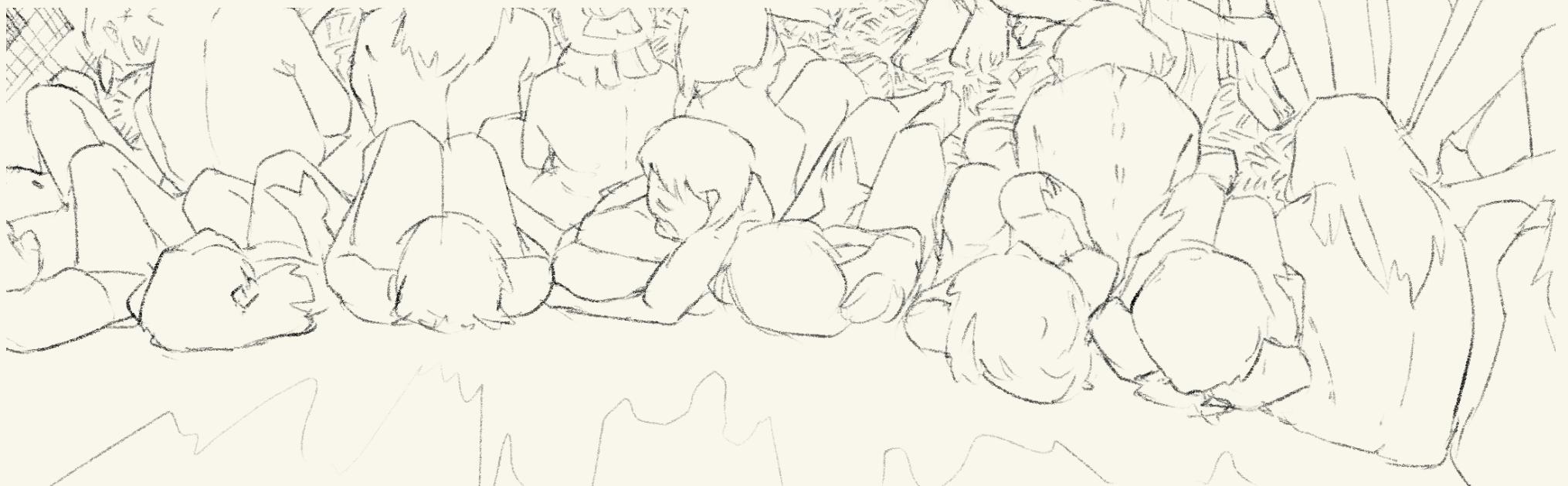
Broadly, this project can be divided into three stages: Research and Indexing, Visual Comprehension, and Concept Creation. The outlines of these three stages were decided near the start of the timeline and have acted as a steady scaffolding over which the project has been built, despite the fact that, as discussed, most of the project has been in a constant state of flux since the very beginning involving such things as methods, media, and even deliverables.

The first stage involves the various processes involved in gaining familiarity with the source material, answering fundamental questions that would guide my approach to the project, establishing an early vision to refer to for

the rest of the duration of the project, and beginning my research on the art of adaptation.

The role of the second stage was to help me develop clear ideas on the vision I held for the aesthetic of the adaptation. Collecting reference images, deciding the format of the final adaptation, and creating a variety of early visual concepts helped me understand the direction of visual design that I wanted to pursue.

The final and longest stage of the project has to do with the creation of designs for the adaptation; creating character designs, establishing a shape language for the world on screen, illustrating and rendering key storybeats, and providing concepts for location and environment designs as well as some supplementary sketches. All these are then organized and bound together to convey my designed ideas and concepts to the (hypothetical!) production team that will receive this art guide.

Country hillside
lined with 'Hemmer'
conifers

Stage 1:
Research and Indexing

All of the various categories and files created as part of the indexing process ◄

A glimpse of the contents of a few of the files; each is formatted to include the page number or page range, as well as the beginning and ending phrase of the passage that is being indexed. ▼

Read and Reread

The very first thing to do when adapting a book to any other media is, of course, to read it cover to cover! My first read was an uninterrupted dedicated read where I focused purely on taking in the pace and flow of the story. I'd originally intended to make notes, but on the suggestion of my guide decided to read naturally, as that first authentic experience is also a big part of understanding and connecting with the book. Once I'd finished my first read (a rollercoaster of an experience) I went back to the first page and began to read once again, but slowly. This time, I would annotate — focusing on digesting all the bits of information in the book, and studying its anatomy.

Annotation

The process of annotation was a rigorous and slow one, but the benefits were certainly worth the effort. Besides gaining incredible familiarity with the book, I was able to re-evaluate my first visualizations and now have a precise index for my reference while designing elements of the story. As a bonus, I'm able to open the book to passages with accuracy that surprises even me at times!

Using an app called Obsidian, I made multiple files under a single 'vault', each pertaining to an important category of information that I wanted to catalogue. These are broadly divided into two sections: details about the World, and details about Characters. Pertaining to worldbuilding, there are pages listing details on Architecture, Travel, Ecology, Food, and Important Locations amongst others. To better understand the people, I indexed every passage that provided information on any of the primary and secondary characters. Additionally, I created a page dedicated to Clothing and descriptions of Gethenians in general. Samples of this annotation exercise are available here as screenshots.

Earliest Visual Diary

During my re-read of the book, I was encouraged by my guide to jot down the spontaneous visuals that came to me in a visual diary, a short series of quick digital sketches that allowed me to retain those images and build upon them. This exercise had the double advantage of helping me down the path of a certain visual direction early on, one that came as a natural reaction to the source material. While the 'diary' never ended up too populated, the exercise was certainly fruitful and allowed me to explore my ideas freely, very early on in my creative process.

Tibe

Country hillside lined with 'Hemmer' conifers

Royal finery

cap ⟶ scarf
knitfur ⟶ coat/cape
hieb
shirt
leather hard-breeches like doves
boots
chain for officials
celtic knots

needs to be heavier – hide body shape

Summary and Vision

In order to capture the 'vision' I held of the book, and to ensure that an expression of my initial feelings remained even as I developed and re-developed ideas during the coming months, I wrote in my own words first a summary of the book (an edited version of which you encountered in the section titled 'Synopsis') and then a brief essay on my artistic vision for the adaptation. Though I would be dealing with only a small wedge of the responsibilities of adaptation film creation, this essay would serve as a guide for all creative decisions that I would make and would enable me to envision those designs as part of a complete film. A copy of this essay follows below:

> The Left Hand of Darkness reads almost like a documentary and travelogue to a real world just outside our own reach. Gethen is explored in beautiful detail, studied with wonder and a genuine desire to understand. The book explores multiple themes, on macro and micro levels. Where Genly must grapple with entire alien governments and attempt to come out on top, he must also come to terms with his relationship with Estraven as two equal individuals alien to one another, and finally his own identity in the face of all that he has learned.
>
> This novel and its story are fundamentally adult stories. Dealing with turbulent and frustrating politics, with complex interpersonal relationships, and with the challenge of the unique Gethenian biology, I believe that any adaptation must maintain its primary audience to be adults. Further, what better tool to use to depict an alien world than the free-est of audiovisual techniques — animation? The visual language of the film need not be serious and humorless, but must be aware of the rich cultural dialogue it carries as baggage (and able to support it).
>
> The world around Genly is alive, rich, and as Le Guin puts it, in the process of making itself. The startling differences between the two nations of Karhide and Orgoreyn echo our own real experiences with the different kinds of philosophies and powers we must navigate in our lives; the two nations come alive through Le Guin's exploration,

from their foods and religions to their official policies and government structures.

> The book is a scientific journal, a personal diary, a travelogue, and a confession. In this book, Le Guin makes not only a convincing study of human nature, but of how the fundamentals of society might change if we were to toggle with one variable — in this case, human sexuality — and how we may digest such an idea (though the concept is certainly less alien in 2021 than it was 1969). Gethen and its people are a concept such as no human has had to wrap their head around before; perhaps Ai was not the most appropriate for the challenge, perhaps no one but him could have achieved success in their mission.
>
> The story is clear and linear, interrupted briefly by beautifully illustrative short notes; a small story, a myth, an excerpt from a religious text, or a scientist's notes on biology. These flesh out the realities and philosophies of Gethen, perhaps none as breathtakingly as Chapter 9 — the story of Estraven the Traitor. Not the character we know, but one born generations ago, for which our own Therem Harth rem ir Estraven was named. A noble and wonderful ancestor from Estre village, labeled a traitor but respected as a person of grand foresight; a heart-wrenching parallel to the Estraven that crosses the Ice with Genly and ultimately transforms the fate of every Gethenian.
>
> Physically, the people of Gethen are described in the text as bearing similarity to the tribes found in the coldest regions of Earth, the Inuit and Yupik people. They are built for the extreme cold, a harsh and terrifying force of nature that occupies most of their time and energy to combat. Not idealized and not vilified, they seem to be a true population rather than a caricature of a race; good people, unstable people, cowardly or kind or slightly stupid people, all can be found in Genly's acquaintances.
>
> The novel plays with time in an exceptional manner — the events of the book take place over the span of a year, starting one spring and

ending at the end of the following winter. Gethenians are patient and move with a slow deliberance even when panicked, travel is solely over water and land at ambling speeds, and Genly pursues a slow mission with governments, embassies and bureaucrats. In contrast, feelings of desperation and of having run out of time chase him for the larger part of the book; when it is over, it is all over too soon.

In my opinion, a successful telling of The Left Hand of Darkness in any medium requires most of all a quality of immersion for the audience. The action is but a small part of the story, which would be incomplete without Genly's careful mental notetaking on his ever-alien surroundings; without Estraven and Genly's quiet meditations on each other; without the quiet moments spent dedicated to food, to rest, to warmth, and to cataloguing the dozens of kinds of snowfall that exist.

Research: Adaptations and Inspirations

The format of media-to-media adaptation begs plenty of thought; it's often referred to as one of the most difficult aspects of storytelling. An initial step towards understanding the challenges and benefits of the exercise was to study a few examples of relevant adaptations — study them for their successes and pitfalls, collect what wisdom I can from these existing projects, and use those insights to guide my own designs.

The first and most essential of these studies was Tales from Earthsea by Studio Ghibli: an adaptation of another of Le Guin's stories. Not only was I able to see how a story of similar scope was approached for adaptation, I also found the incredible treasure trove that was Le Guin's own reaction to the adaptation. Her thoughts have served both as cautionary messages and as guiding paths for my approach to this hypothetical adaptation of her other work. A link to her essay is included in the notes below, as well as some excerpts that I had sorted into a few categories to better digest them. I do strongly recommend reading her thoughts, they're fantastically phrased.

The other studies focused on two films, the first of them being the feature-length stop motion film Fantastic Mr. Fox by Wes Anderson, chosen as both the film and the source material are very close to my heart. Wes Anderson takes a rather unorthodox approach to adapting the material of the childrens' book, and it's an interesting film to keep in mind as I adapt a story for an audience of adults. The last study is of the adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Matchgirl by Roger Allers under Disney. An animated short film, this example was chosen for its contrasting approach to adaptation compared to my other studies, for its tone and focus on the cold (a theme very central to The Left Hand of Darkness) and as a representative of a highly influential studio with an incredible body of work, many of which are adaptations.

In the coming section are my notes on each of the films, as well as some relevant links that I kept handy while I studied them.

Tales from Earthsea — Goro Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli
2D animated feature film
Excerpts:
On the High Marsh
Dragonfly

Studio Ghibli's 2006 film, Tales from Earthsea, is loosely based in the Earthsea mythology. It was directed by Gorō Miyazaki, the son of Hayao Miyazaki. The plot was "entirely different" according to the author Ursula K. Le Guin, who told director Gorō Miyazaki, "It is not my book. It is your movie. It is a good movie", although she later expressed her disappointment with the end result.[1]

Ursula's own thoughts:
Ursula K. Le Guin — Gedo Senki

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[1] Wikipedia contributors. (2022, June 20). Tales from Earthsea (film). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tales_from_Earthsea_(film)

Sorting of excerpts from Le Guin's essay:

Adaptation

- *Much of it was exciting. The excitement was maintained by violence, to a degree that I find deeply untrue to the spirit of the books.*

- *Of course a movie shouldn't try to follow a novel exactly — they're different arts, very different forms of narrative. There may have to be massive changes. But it is reasonable to expect some fidelity to the characters and general story in a film named for and said to be based on books that have been in print for 40 years.*

The Nature of the Story

- *I think the film's 'messages' seem a bit heavyhanded because, although often quoted quite closely from the books, the statements about life and death, the balance, etc., don't follow from character and action as they do in the books. However well meant, they aren't implicit in the story and the characters. They have not been 'earned.' So they come out as preachy.*

- *in the film, evil has been comfortably externalized in a villain, the wizard Kumo/Cob, who can simply be killed, thus solving all problems.*

- *The animals of his imagination are seen with much tenderness — I liked the horse-llama's expressive ears. I very much liked the scenes of plowing, drawing water, stabling the animals, and so on, which give the film an earthy and practical calmness — a wise change of pace from constant conflict and "action". In them, at least, I recognised my Earthsea.*
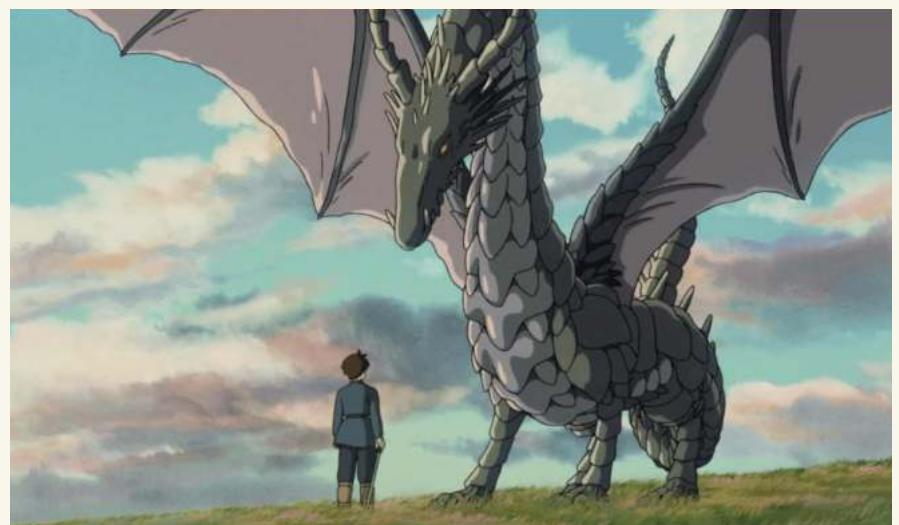
The Issue of Color

- *The makers of the American TV version, while boasting that they were "color blind," reduced the colored population of Earthsea to one and a half. I have blasted them for whitewashing Earthsea, and do not forgive them for it.*

- *Most of the people in anime films look — to the American/European eye — white. I am told that the Japanese audience perceives them differently. I am told that they may perceive this Ged as darker than my eye does. I hope so.*

Most of the characters look white to me, but there is at least a nice variation of tans and beiges. And Tenar's fair hair and blue eyes are right, since she's a minority type from the Kargish islands.

My Own Notes

- The issue of color — extremely interesting, looking into this with a survey; in the film, I saw the characters as brown, and of color — that Le Guin did not is curious

- Events moved quickly; when landscapes and people don't need describing, a lot can be expressed in seconds

- Follows a linear, simple narrative; few interjections

- Defeats the spirit of the books in their explorations of human conflict and internal evils by externalizing evil incarnate

- At many times, left me wondering (why??); unusual for a Ghibli film, and emblematic of problematic character writing

- Stunning music; fits the themes beautifully

- Costume designs strange, but not unfamiliar/confusing
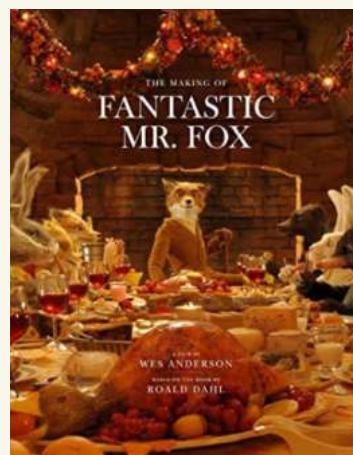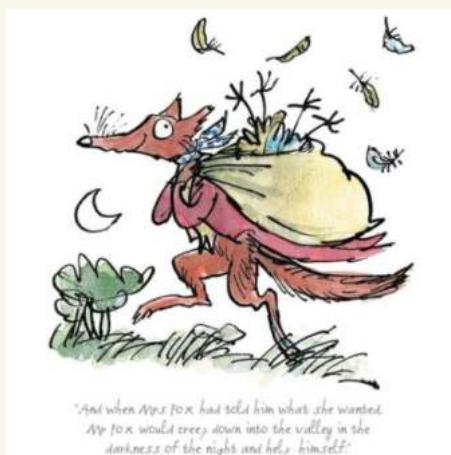
Fantastic Mr. Fox — Wes Anderson
Stop motion feature film
A childhood favourite book of mine; an adored film as well

Notes

- The book and film are entirely different stories centered around the same base characters

- Slim, simple book; cannot fill a feature film without the addition of an act, new arcs, new characters

- Entirely different treatments: film ages up the content of the book

- Themes, jokes, and conflicts for adults

- Central theme is a man's midlife crisis rather than ones' 'inescapable nature'

- Beautiful, storybook aesthetics with theatrical presentation

- Slightly creepy stuffed-animal visual treatment of characters fits tone of adult story created from kids' building blocks

- Most memorable in the original book was the food — elaborately described; film's focus shifted away from the food, to theft

The Little Matchgirl — Roger Allers, Disney
6.5 minute short film, 2006
Original Story: Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Match Girl

Notes

- Made me cry

- 'Silent' film, set to a violin concerto; extremely effective

- Limited color palette: greys, interrupted with orange/yellow flame

- Very simple storytelling, no fancy effects, worked with the weight of the content

- Very direct adaptation, down to each of the three visions

- Uses the same final metaphors for death as the story, but clearly depicts the frozen body as well — No censoring

- Does not depict the morning after, unlike the original text

- Changes her look — no bare head, open blonde curls. Nevertheless, very pretty as emphasized in the story

- No mention of mother or father in the film; in the story, she fears a beating from her father

- The appropriate length for such a quick tale, I feel

This was, however, only scratching the surface of attempting to understand adaptation. Stepping back a bit, I found grander, tougher questions that it was essential for me to keep in mind during the project so as to not go astray and create meaningless work. To begin with, why should this particular story be told in the medium I wish to adapt it to? What can that medium contribute, and further — what am I contributing to the canon of this story by retelling it in my own voice? One question posed to me by Prof. Aditi Chitre was, 'why do you believe this story should be retold at all?' These are not simple questions to contend with, and even as I approach the end of the project at the time of writing this, I'm not sure I could provide a solid answer. However, that will not stop me from attempting to do so!

The Left Hand of Darkness is a stimulating, detail-rich book brimming with compelling visuals and dedicated worldbuilding. The author has gone to incredible lengths to make the world feel lifelike; I could tell you about Gethen as if it were a real planet — I know the color of the moon, a dull rufous red, but I also know of the little dining implement they use to crack the ice that forms on top of their beer. I can tell you about the types of trees found on the planet, describe to you the peculiarities of the Karhidish accent, and quite likely I'd be able to find my way through the old capital on the plains of Rer if you plopped me into it. It is an absolute pleasure and an honor, then, to attempt to concretize all the vivid visuals that Le Guin is able to evoke in my mind with her words. As I read the book, I wished and hoped that I'd known of it even sooner, and that there were more people around me who had also encountered it, who I could discuss the book with. While the source material will always remain the truest telling of the story, I like to believe that an animated film would only skyrocket the awareness of this particular work from an already beloved author.

Furthermore, and this is rather important to me — the book deals with a special theme, that of gender, in an incredibly nuanced manner. Le Guin's exploration of what gender means to a society, a culture, and an individual might not seem too bold today, but at the time of publishing in 1969 was certainly a brave topic to raise. With the dramatic increase of discourse available about the subject since that time, however, I feel that this book is able to talk to us once more in wonderfully simple terms — reminding us of where the conversation begins, and why it really is so important to have it. Now especially, it's important to remind people of the questions that Le Guin had asked about half a century ago, because while in 1969 the discussion might not have gotten the traction it deserved, in today's world we are certainly more equipped to discuss the topic. Her extremely valuable input should not be left to fade into the forgotten past.

Lastly, I feel that much of the media we consume as adults in the 2020s lacks the whimsical nature and absurdity that fantastical science fiction provides. While there are a few wonderful projects that sit in this niche (like the Love Death + Robots anthology) and reboots of wonderful science fiction from decades past (Dune, Blade Runner 2049) much of the more fantastical themes of science fiction have been relegated to a younger audience of teens and pre-teens. There is, I feel, always a need for more animation geared towards adult audiences that does not feel the need to make itself too grave and dark in order to be accepted as adult media. I've been long interested in movies and media that fall into this category, being someone who has always loved animated content and has carried that love with me into adulthood.

Stage 2:
Visual Comprehension

▲ *Between Volcanoes: Our main characters traverse treacherous trails between the active volcanoes Drumner and Dremogole*

Preliminary Visual Concepts

With my analysis of the book complete and preliminary research done, I found myself somewhat overwhelmed. Not quite sure how to tackle the project next, I began doing what comes naturally — drawing. I created a few illustrations of some of the strongest visuals that had stuck with me post my second reading of the book. Doing so helped me explore character designs and environments and establish some basic practice, but did not make for a stable approach to the project at all. Luckily, I made the decision to meet my guide not long after.

These images were not a waste of effort at all, though. Drawing the 40+ characters in 'parade' helped me explore the variety of body types imaginable in this race, while 'between volcanoes' and 'homecoming' helped me explore my ideas of the environment and ambience. 'Skiier' allowed me to play with textures and a limited color palette, while exploring a more stylized form of character design. Each of these images are included in the moodboard, and some have made it into the final artbook.

At dusk, Estraven returns to the campsite with stolen goods. He's a magnificent skiier, as described by Genly
▶

▲ *The Parade: The opening sequence of the book, an elaborate parade in the capital city of Karhide first introduces us to our characters and gives us a glimpse of Gethen*

▲ *Homecoming: Genly and Estraven spot the faint lights of a town, the first sign of other life in over 4 months*

Story Sequencing and 3-Act Structure

The meeting with my guide proved extremely fruitful, and she pointed out some exercises that felt like they should have been obvious, but just hadn't occurred to me. From then on, I put my visual exploration on hold while I worked simultaneously on deciding the story of the adaptation and collecting a moodboard to help me visualize my hypothetical film. I wrote out in terms of major events the plot of the book, which is available in this report in the section 'Event-Wise Plot Summary'. This, I visualized by representing each event as a colored block, with all events placed end to end. I chose to omit all short stories in the book save for the one titled 'Estraven the Traitor', which I placed as an interlude at what I believe is an appropriate moment between major plot sections.

After the sections were sequenced, I evaluated how long (relative to each other) I felt each section should be, in terms of runtime. While I had not yet decided the actual format of the film (feature, double-feature, or 4 part miniseries) I had decided where episode breaks would be in each format, if required. Of course, this exercise was more to bolster my understanding of the material I wanted to adapt; as someone with no experience working on this scale the time-distribution was based solely on thought experiments and my pre-existing knowledge of film language. I expect that if the film were to actually be produced, the timeline distribution might differ greatly from my estimate. However, attempting to estimate this had the benefit of forcing me to evaluate which sections might be shortened, which should be extended, which images I'd like to focus and spend long on, and which might be omitted entirely. Le Guin's writing is rather seamless and very condensed — no minor scene exists that doesn't serve a crucial narrative purpose — and thus very little in terms of events can be omitted entirely, only condensed. However, many of the extended descriptive sections of the book can be shrunk by the power of images (each speaking a thousand words, of course!) and certain sections (such as Estraven's fall into an ice crevasse) can be expanded upon for the sheer power of their imagery, which would be nice to have on screen for longer.

With my sequences all in order and roughly mapped to their relative runtimes, I made the decision to think of the adaptation as a single, long feature film (perhaps of 2 hours); while this decision does not much affect the concept development work, it is helpful during this exercise to think of my hypothetical film in tangible terms, and this included deciding a format. However, it's important to confess that this decision was once again not made from a place of experience, based rather on my instinct of how much time could be spent on each section of the story without creating an experience that drags unnecessarily. It was also at this point that I was able to identify the rough mid-point of the film, ensure that the first and second half were balanced in terms of pacing, and identify a rough 3-Act structure.

The first act involves much location-jumping, and introduces to the viewer the two nations that are at the center of the political drama of the story, as well as giving us an introduction to all major players in the story. The act concludes at a cliffhanger with our main character Genly landing in grave danger. Between the end of the first act and the start of the second, I've introduced the short story 'Estraven the Traitor', a brief tale from many generations before the events of the main story that beautifully reflects the story of the modern Estraven, as well as foreshadowing some of the events to come. In the book this short story is placed at an earlier position, but I was only able to appreciate its impact on a second reading when I had more information on the plot. For this reason, it's placed at a later stage in the film adaptation.

The second and longest act opens with an update on Genly, who is imprisoned under mysterious circumstances and in terrible condition. We follow him as he is taken to Pulefen Voluntary Farm, and watch simultaneously as Estraven devises a plan and undertakes the dangerous mission of rescuing Genly. From here, the two embark on their epic journey across the ice. Though set in stunning locations and with intense stakes at each turn, in this act the cast is reduced to just Genly and Estraven and the most compelling arc becomes the evolution of their relationship. From distrustful near-strangers to companions that struggle with the awkwardness between them (bolstered further by the intimacy they are forced into and the sexual tension that arises from that)
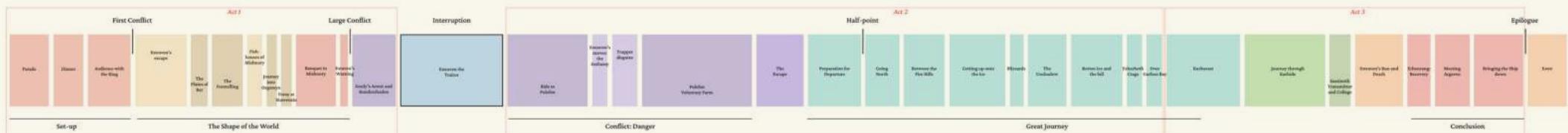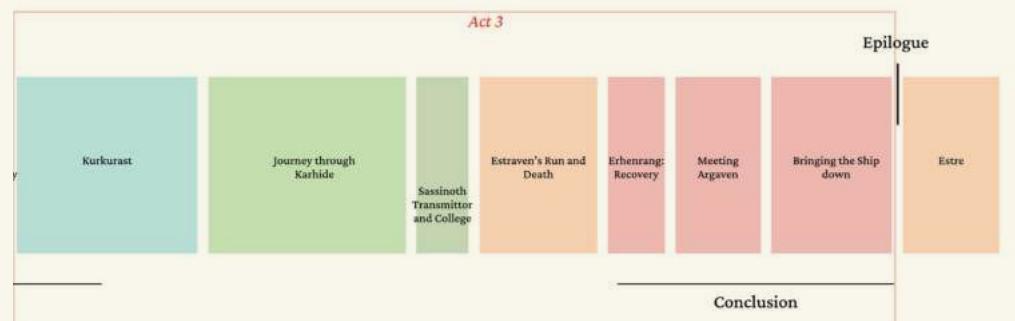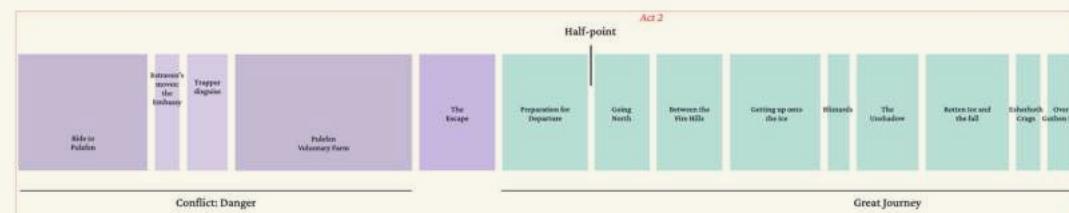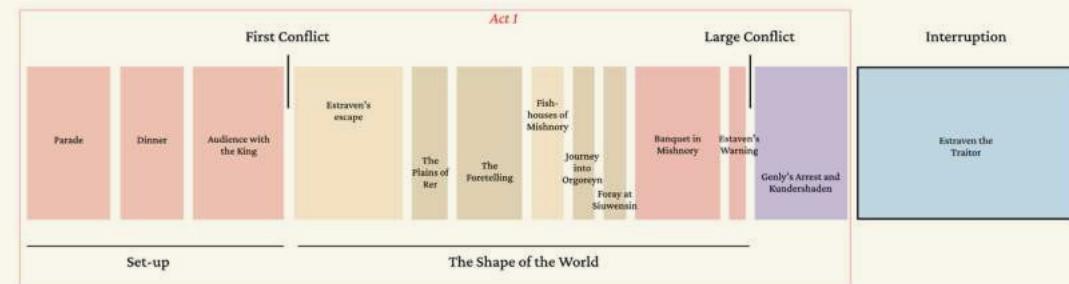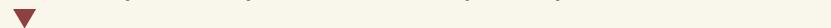
and finally to the closest of friends, a single harmonious machine, connected even on a telepathic level as Genly finally manages to teach to Estraven his peoples' craft of 'mindspeaking'. The act concludes with the end of their long and arduous journey, as they re-enter civilization.
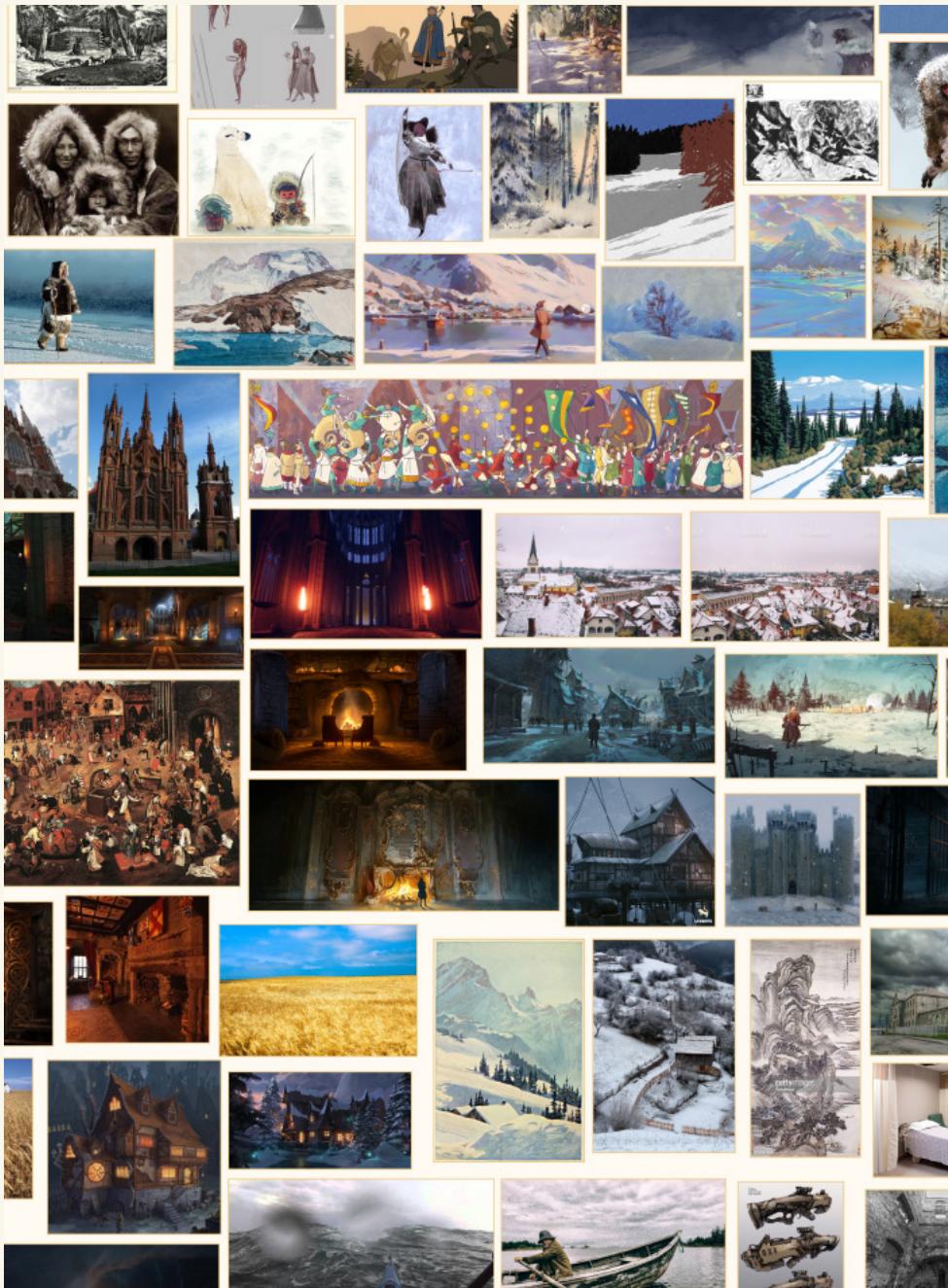
The final act of the story serves to answer the thesis question of the book: Will Genly succeed in his mission to convince the nations of Gethen to join the Eku-men? When a sudden tragedy results in the death of Estraven, we're left with a bittersweet ending that makes it clear that his sacrifice, as the truest patriot of all Gethenians, was made in order to help Genly succeed in his mission and bring Gethen into a new age of knowledge. The governments of Gethen crumble under the weight of their exposed lies and corrupted methods, while at the same time they agree to join the Ekumen and welcome human ambassadors from beyond the stars upon their own soil. Genly, meanwhile, must deal with his own grief over the loss of Estraven. An epilogue sees him travel to Estre, the hometown of Estraven, in hopes of finding some closure. He wonders whether the exercise had been a futile pilgrimage; things change, however, as Estraven's parent — the Lord of Estre — asks to hear of the journey over the great Ice, while Estraven's child asks to hear stories of the Ekumen and the other worlds of the universe.

*A closer look at each of the 3 Acts of the story*

▶
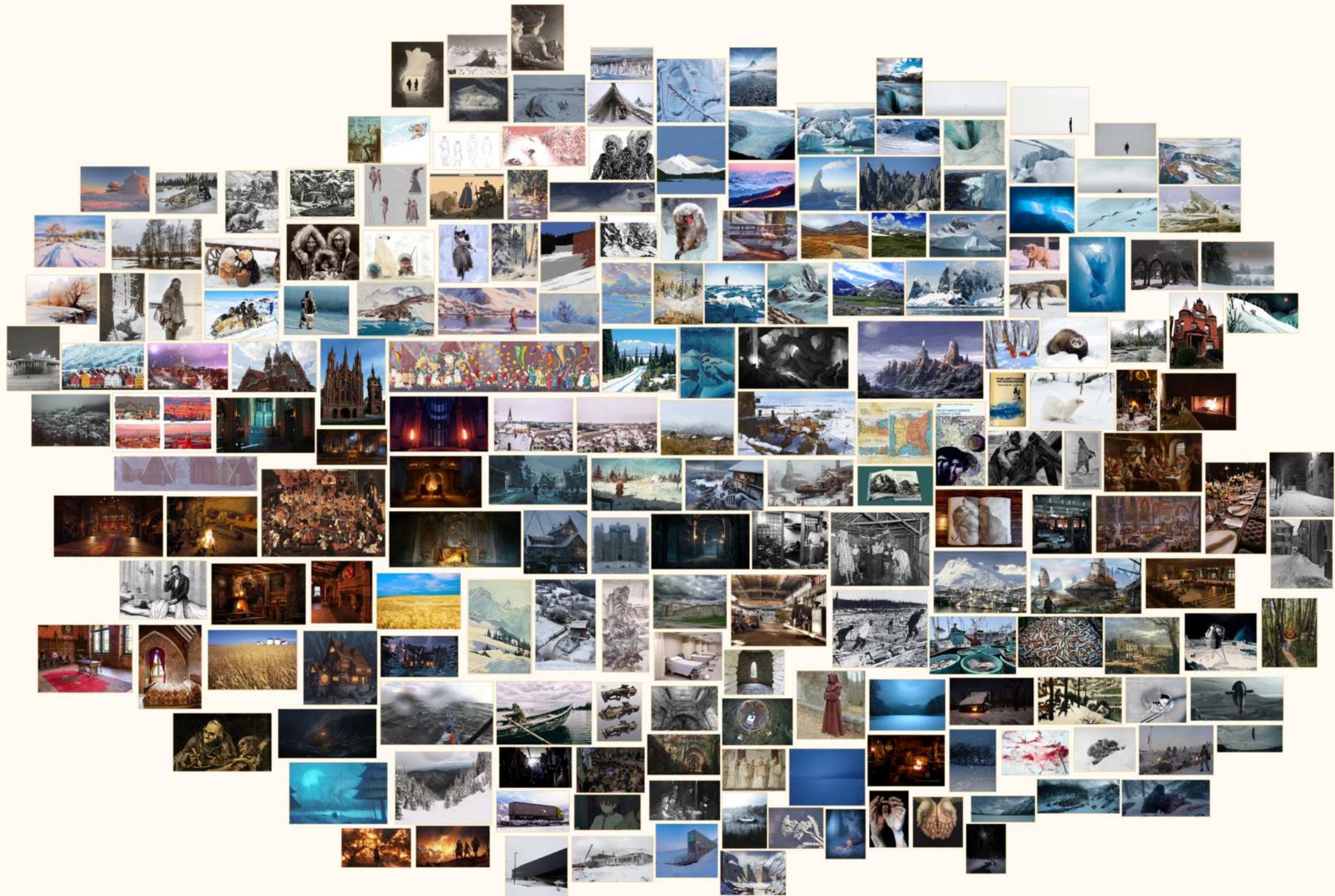
The full film structure, as viewed at once. The different colors represent thematically and tonally connected sections of the story.

▼
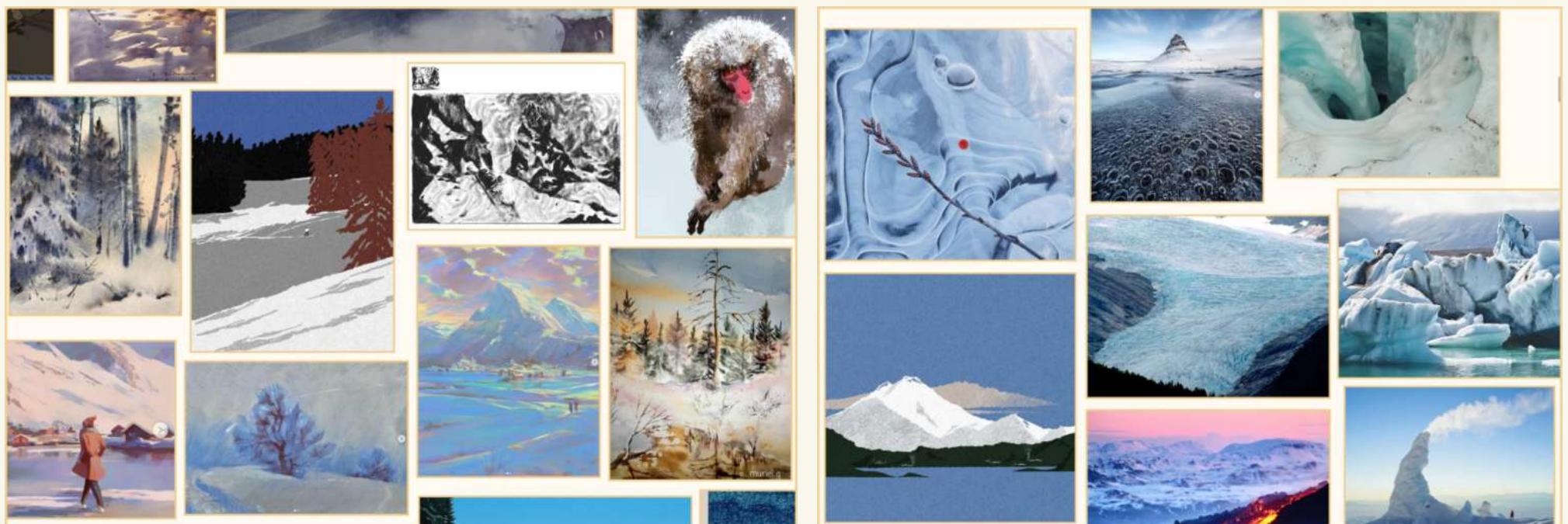
Moodboard Collection

As I worked on sequencing the story, I collected a variety of images into a moodboard that eventually included over 200 pictures. These could be categorized into a few types. I collected images that inspired me artistically, images that represented the visuals of the film and could be used as references, and official images that had been published with the author's approval: older covers of the book, images from an illustrated version, and even a hand-drawn map of the great continent where the story takes place from the author herself. Additionally, I included my own early visual concepts. This moodboard helped me capture the essence of the film that I was imagining, often in the works of artists with abilities far greater than my own. In the following section is not only a view of the entire collection of images, but multiple closer looks so that you, the reader, may enjoy in more detail some of my favourite inspirations and sections of the board.
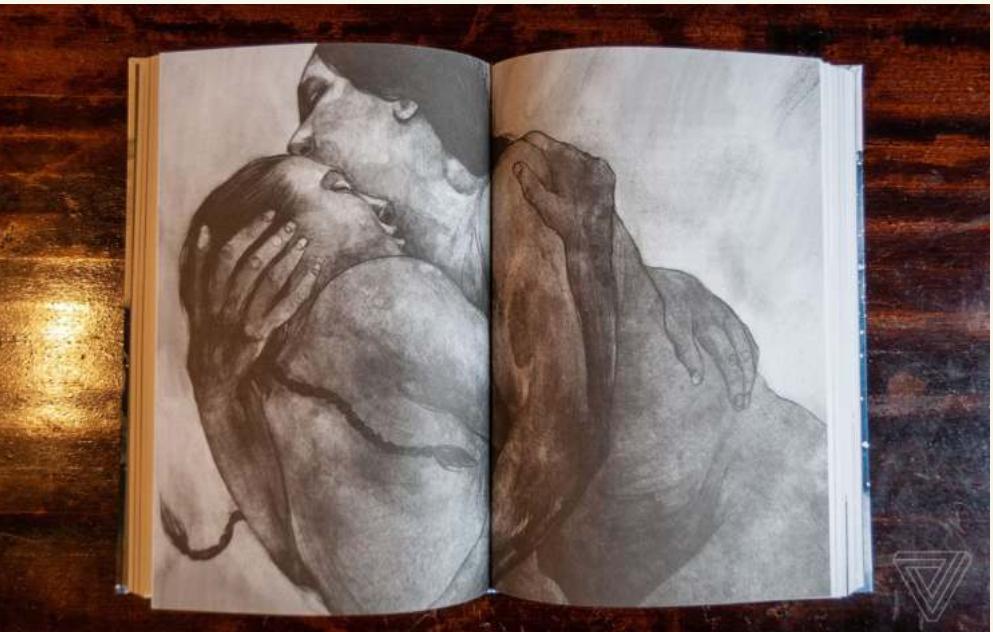
▲ *A picture taken by my father (Divya Oberoi) in my childhood neighborhood*


Illustrations by David Lupton for the officially released illustrated copy of the novel ▼

Artist: *https://evandahm.tumblr.com*

Artist: *https://twitter.com/JessFink*

Artist: *https://bethfuller.tumblr.com*

Artist: *https://nim-lock.tumblr.com*
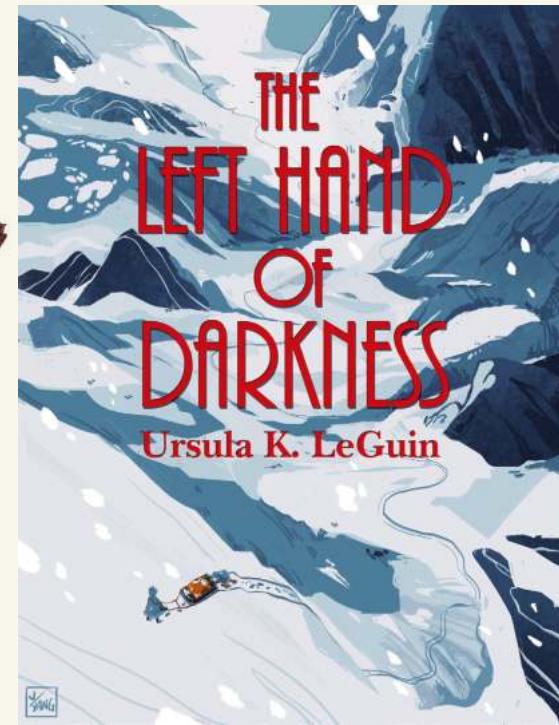
A small collection of fanart made for The Left Hand of Darkness. Many amateur and hobbyist artists have engaged with the book, as have professional or semi-professional artists.

I enjoy studying how other people perceive the characters, though I avoided looking at too much fanwork before creating my own base designs so as to not influence my visualizations too much.

Artist: *https://rabbitcourage.tumblr.com*
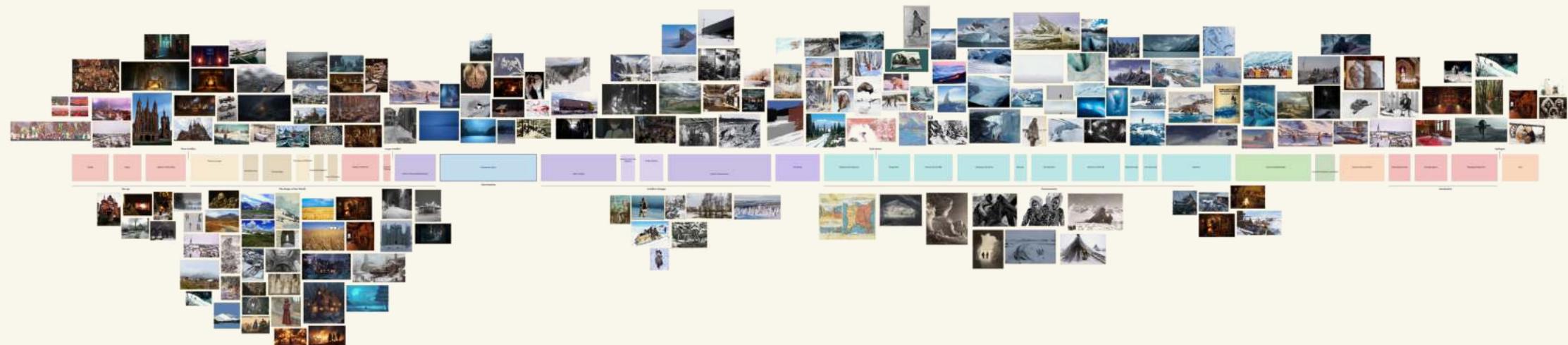
Moodboard Sequencing and Observed Patterns

With the moodboard satisfactorily complete, I began sequencing the images along the visualization of the story timeline I'd earlier created. I sought images to represent the less-populated areas of the story, though these images did not always satisfactorily represent the visualizations I had in mind. Once all major events, locations, and storybeats were represented, I had before myself a film that was not a film: one could parse the entire sequence and watch the movie in their mind's eye, filling in the details and movement.

A few patterns jumped out at me when I looked at the complete sequence for the first time. For one, I noticed how dense and varied the imagery of the first act was, as compared to the second which takes place mostly in icy landscapes, and the third which returns to many of the locations of the first act.

Secondly, the passing of the seasons jumps out in clear imagery over the course of the story, only accentuated by the characters' travel north. The story takes place over the course of a Gethenian year. Starting in the mucky spring where the winter snow slowly melts, Genly experiences the wet Gethenian summer, the golden harvests of autumn in the south, and is imprisoned at the onset of winter. After the escape from the voluntary farm (rather a concentration camp) the two find themselves undertaking their journey north of the northernmost inhabited region of the world through the four coldest winter months. These months are white and blue, bitter and grey. As they reach Karhide, the seasons turn again, and the nations of Gethen are born into the age of the Ekumen in a muddy, wet spring. This progression was crystal clear in the sequence, and helps make the passage of time be felt rather than just stated, especially in a story that takes place over such a broad timeline.

Stage 3:
Concept Creation

From this point forward, all illustrations and images in this report are my own creations for this project, excepting the labelled reference images on pg. 44 and Ursula Le Guin's hand-drawn map on pg. 49.

Character Creation

Once the time arrived to begin designing the actual assets of the project rather than just creating exploratory sketches, I once again found myself overwhelmed with the scope of the project. I chose first to focus on character design, for a few reasons. For one, they felt the most approachable; designing a world involves the pulling-together of far more concepts and ideas, while a character can be born from a single, simpler set of ideas. Further, I'd be able to iterate more and thus spend more time thinking about and establishing a shape language for the visuals. Lastly: though this book offers a truly fantastic world, as Prof. Chitre put it, the juice of the story is in the characters and their relationships with one another. Getting started had gotten easier.

The Parade illustration had been a key exploratory exercise in character design and I truly enjoyed the look of those characters, but when the time came to develop proper characters out of those explorations I found myself quite uninspired and rather unhappy with my attempts. I began to sketch on paper, rather than digitally, focusing on interesting forms and drawing figures over and over until something looked appealing. Prof. Ranade appreciated the exercise and encouraged me to take it a step forward by doing the same thing with other media. I chose to use a compressed charcoal block first, a medium which gave me very little precision and forced me instead to focus on impactful and distinct silhouettes. After this, I proceeded to experiments in ink, using a variety of calligraphy and illustration nibs with waterproof Higgins Chartpak ink. Each nib coaxed my hand to move in a different way, and these versions tended to focus on illustrated detail.
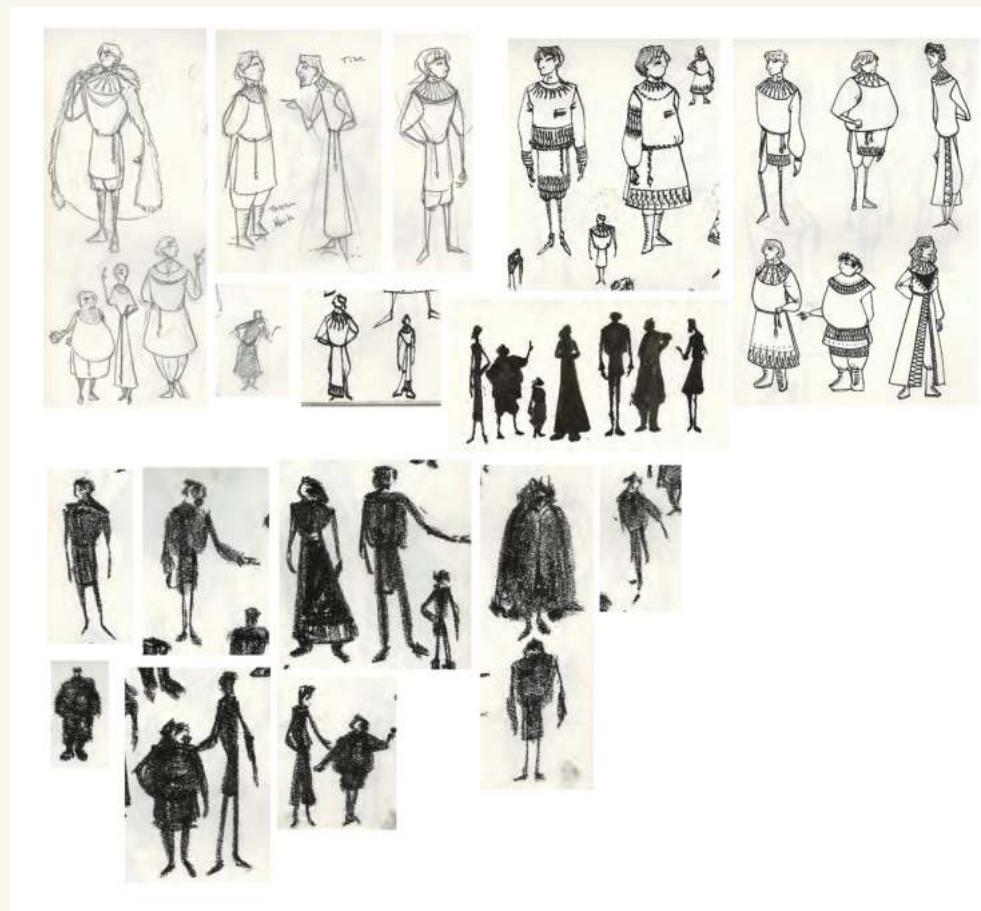

▲ *Lineart of the character illustrations in 'Parade', a composition with over 40 unique characters*

*First (fairly uninspired) attempts at characters after 'Parade'*
▶
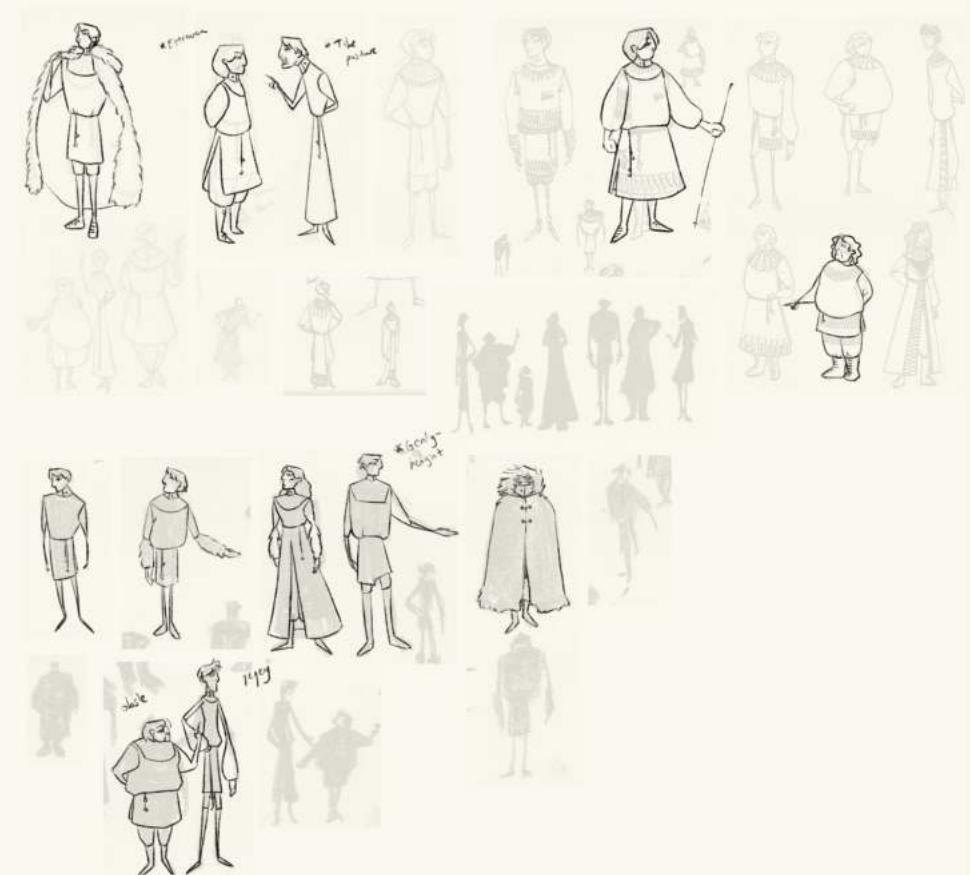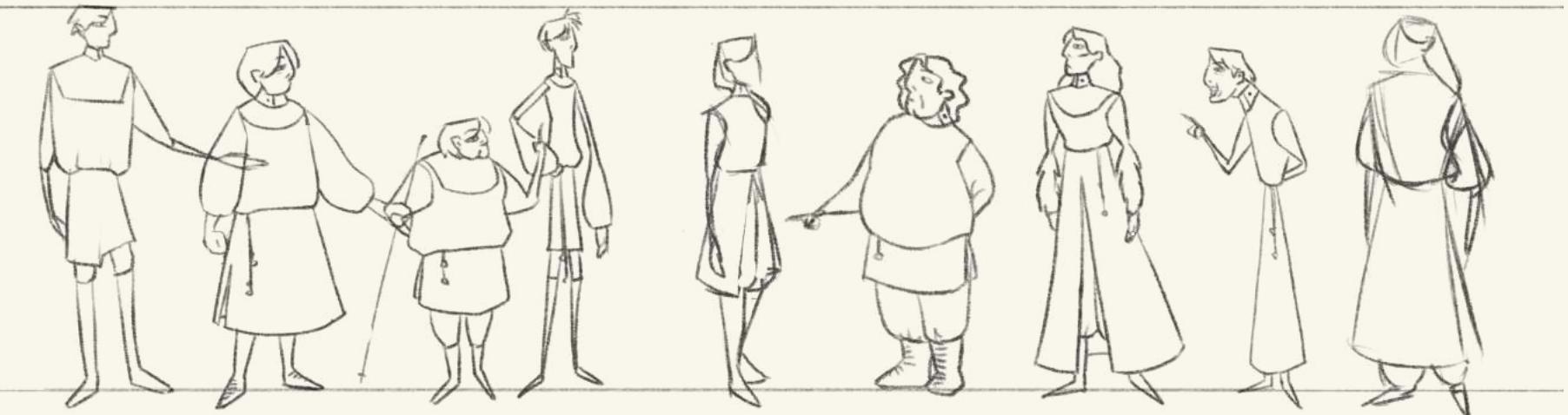
Once I'd filled multiple pages with these exercises, I scanned each sheet and collected into a single document my favourite results from the explorations. Layering some digital butter paper over the document, I traced each with pencil, in order to create roughly coherent characters. These traced experiments were then laid out in my very first lineup. Here, they lay out of proportion to one another, clearly a collage of independent explorations. My first pass over the lineup sought to even out their features to lie in proportion to one another, make them look like specimens of the same race.

Digital tracings of favourite explorations
▼

*Tracings
organized into a
'zeroeth' lineup*
▶

*First pass on
the lineup to
create coherently
proportioned
designs*
▶

Genly   Estraven   Obsle   Yegey   Gaum   Shusgis   Argaven   Tibe   Faxe

Once the first pass was complete, I returned to the source material: using my index, I reread all passages that referenced each character, and made notes on where my visualization had significantly deviated from the original characterization. With these notes in mind, I proceeded to complete a second pass that edited the characters to better match the notes, as well as using the opportunity to exaggerate certain aspects of the characters.

Notes written directly over the first lineup

▶
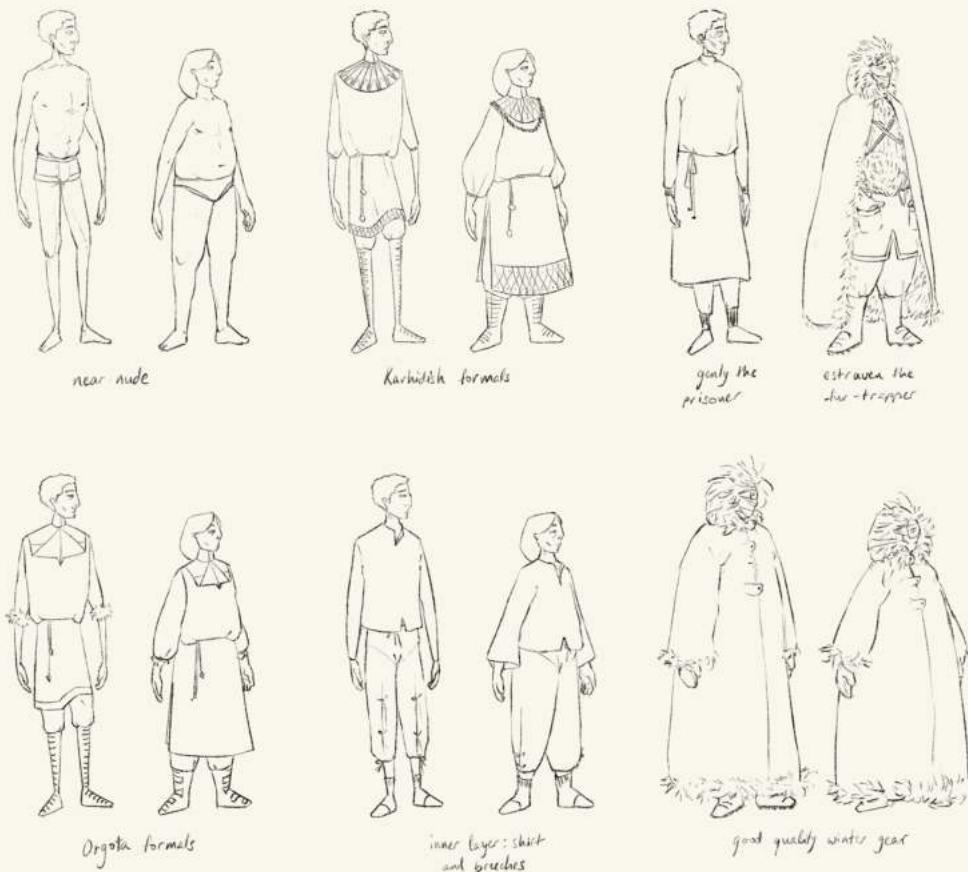
▲ *The second lineup that largely solidified the body language of the cast*

Eventually, the lineup underwent one more pass, this time with a finer tool. Up until this point, the bodies of characters had developed good variety, but facial features were underdeveloped. The finer pencil allowed me to fill in details of the clothing and especially facial detail. These were also colored, taking care to document Genly's darker skin and attempting to differentiate between the elegant colors of Karhidish formals versus the garish bright hues of Orgota formals.

A set of illustrations of Genly and Estraven shows them in a variety of outfits as they described in the book, as well as an anatomical study (we do see both characters naked or near-naked in the course of the story, but it's a good reference to have regardless). We see them in formals fit for court (from both nations), in a trapper's disguise and prisoners' garb, in their innerwear of shirt and breeches, and in heavy protective gear of high quality that keeps them alive in the winter months out on the ice. With this, it was now time to put these characters in their world and test out how the designs would hold up.

near nude

Karhidish formals

genly the prisoner

estraven the fur-trapper

Orgota formals

inner layer: shirt and breeches

good quality winter gear

Key Beat Staging and Rendering

A major deliverable of the project involved illustrations of key storybeats, key moments of the story that set the tone for the film and represent major events and settings. I set off creating these in a rough chronological order, focusing on character-centric moments that display the union of character and world. The staging of these key beats, visible most clearly through the sketches, remains fairly consistent in shape language as the character designs remain consistent through all of them.

Rendering each of the staged key beats brought a different challenge (and different fun!) altogether. Wanting to explore a variety of visual styles and media, I rendered each sketch in a unique digital style with varying methods. Styles were chosen to suit the given scene best, but a few other considerations were also kept in mind:

- Is this style animateable? While this doesn't mean too much in recent times, imagining how a given style might be executed in film is always beneficial while creating the rules of that style.

- Is this style suitable for more of the scenes, or only the particular one that's being rendered in it? Even if it is hyperspecific to the given scene (consider the near-total blackness of the inside of the van to Pulefen farm) does the style look coherent with the others? Could another style morph into this one?

- How does this style lend itself to clarity, contrast, and character definition? Characters are the central focus of the adaptation, and it's essential that the style highlight their expressions and body language clearly.

More questions would come to mind naturally as I worked on these concept illustrations. Given the literal alien-ness of Gethen, I had to remind myself that nothing was to be taken for granted. Keeping basic questions in mind helped ensure that I wouldn't settle into mindless illustration, and that I kept thinking about the concepts I was creating. Examples of these questions are:

- Do the trees on this planet have hollows and holes, when there are no tree-dwelling creatures?

- What do the markings on prey animals look like if there are no predatory birds or animals?

- Their moon is a dull rufous red; what does the rest of the sky look like? What do the night and day skies include?

- How are sleds designed on a planet where there are no sled dogs or other sled animals to pull it, only humans?

- How do different social classes and professions dress against the cold?

Creating these illustrations gave me a chance to explore how characters interact with each other and their immediate surroundings. In order to provide context for the world they lived in, I worked on certain other pieces that emphasized location and environment.

While I worked on these concepts, I also kept in mind some of my stylistic inspirations. I was particularly interested in borrowing from films that have a malleable visual style, or who directly employ multiple distinct treatments in the same film. Persistently, I've found inspiration in films such as The Tale of the Princess Kaguya, The Breadwinner, and the Triplets of Belleville.

▲ *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya's style morphs beautifully with the tone of the film*

The Breadwinner would employ a paper-cutout style to suggest a story within the story. ▶

The Triplets of Belleville's approach to playful adult animation has inspired me for years ▼

Key Beat Illustrations

Genly and Asra: Imprisoned in the Pulefen Voluntary Farm, Genly befriends a dying Gethenian

Banquet in Mishnory: Genly is hosted by the Orgota officials as they drunkenly question him
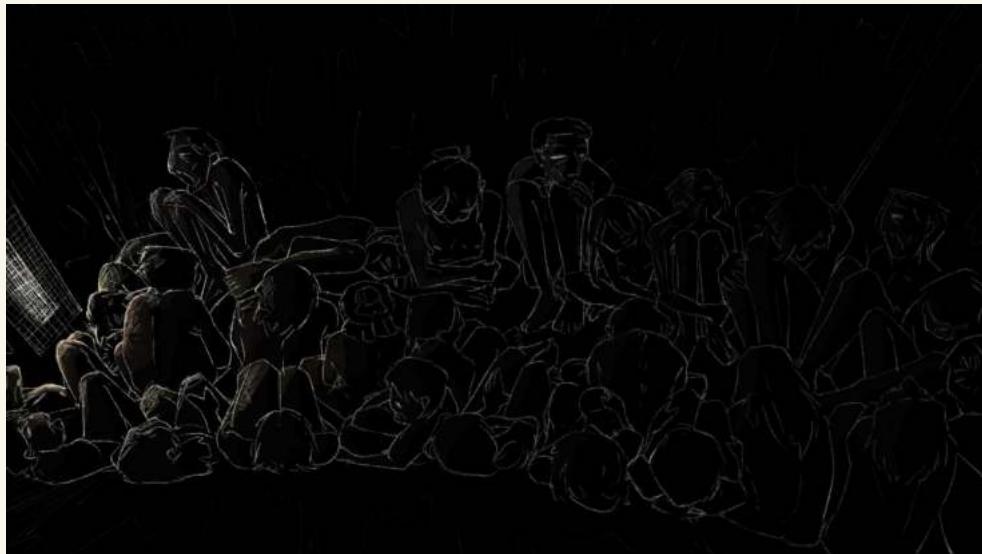

Between Drumner and Dremogole: travelling through an active volcanic region in the Fire Hills

Bodies on the Ice: Son of the Lord of Estre defends himself against his jealous, murderous brothers

Key Beat Illustrations (cont.)

The Ride to Pulefen: Disoriented, Genly is transported in the dark for days with almost 30 others

The Palace: a nervous Genly approaches the King of Karhide for his planned audience

Estraven the Fur Trapper: Disguised, Estraven smuggles Genly past inspectors in his sled

The Fish-Houses of Mishnory: Post-exile, Estraven is summoned by Commensal Yegey

Environment and Location Guides

In order to visualize some of the most important settings of the story, I used traditional media to create wide angle views of different locations on Gethen. While the line between some of the more location-based key beats and these environment sketches is blurred, I wanted specifically to focus on traditional media for these exercises. Doing so would hopefully do a few things for me. For one, it might force me to visualize things in a different manner (and thus impact my other digital explorations as well); I also hoped that the constraints of the medium might organically birth unique a unique look and feel for each piece. Lastly, on my personal agenda, I hoped to gain some re-familiarity with traditional media — something I've lost a little in the last few years. This was not a very successful conviction, as I've discussed at length in the section titled 'Reflections'.

Near the middle of Stage 2 of the project it had become clear to me that I wanted to pursue a character-centric project, and not a location-centric one. Even now, the locations aren't heavily developed at all — rather a suggestion to give a sense for the world that the characters inhabit. However, even while few pieces were made dedicatedly as location guides, many digital illustrations that started out as Key Beats employed a zoomed-out view that helped establish the world more than representing a moment between characters. The following page holds examples of such paintings. Though not in traditional media, as I'd hoped to approach them, they provide context for the world as I'd needed environment and location guides to do.

▲ *Pen-and-ink illustration of Erhenrang, the capital city of Karhide. Scanned and colored digitally*

Environment Guides

The Esherhoth Crags: An important rocky landmark during the great journey across the Ice

*The Hut in the Fog: A lone hut on the edge of a lake, in the short story Estraven the Traitor*
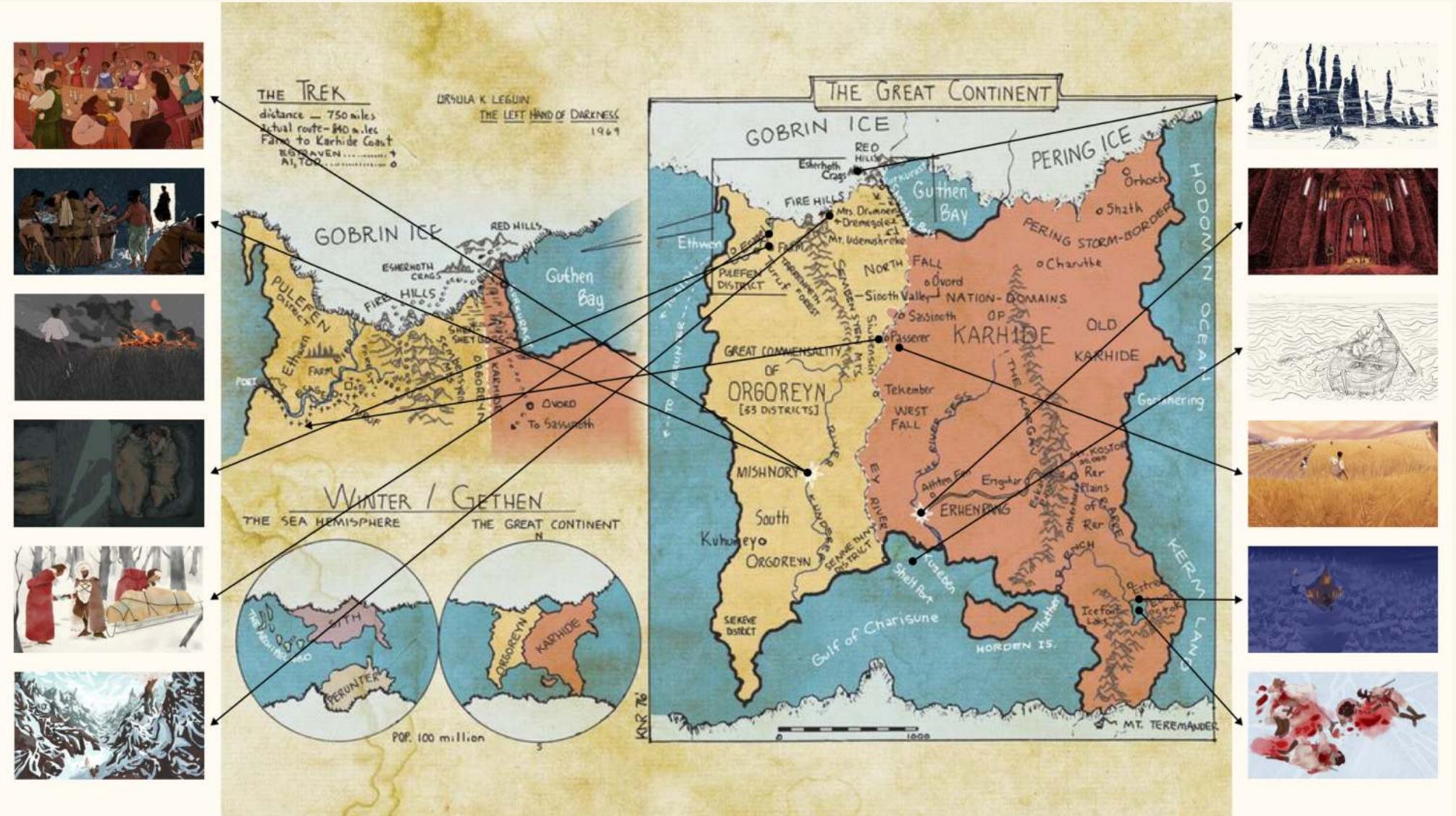
Wheat Fields: Genly's autumn season trek through Karhide takes place during the harvest

Foray at Siuwensin: In the middle of the night, a village is attacked while Genly flees half-dressed

Putting each illustrated key beat in context of the map where the story takes place, this one illustrated by Ursula Le Guin herself, helps express the scope and richness of the tale, and track of the movement of the characters. Doing so also helps avoid the classic storytelling error of misrepresenting travel time and effort, in a story that is very much centered around travel of many kinds. These are most of the key beats, but not all. The full annotated map is available in the artbook.

Supplementary Sketches

Perhaps some of the most important sketches created for this project, these supplementary sketches include a wide variety of assorted ideas that I wish to convey to my hypothetical production team, though not necessarily through a fully rendered piece. Originally, these were meant to be only a minor part of the deliverables. However, as the project went on, their importance became more pronounced. It's through these supplementary sketches that we're able to see more intimate character interactions and expressions; whether through a 4 page story sketch to help convey the movement and pace of their journey, or in close-ups of character interactions in moments represented in key storybeat illustrations.

Shot-staging sketches (such as those on the coming page) help express the evolution of character relationships. For instance, we see the incredible contrast between one of the first moments shared between Genly and Estraven, and their last moment together. Other sketches helped me explore character expressions, moods, and interesting visual ides that I otherwise wouldn't have time to execute to completion. Though the supplementary sketches may feel like filler material, they carry some of the most essential information in the entire artbook.

Pesthry: The largest land mammal on Gethen, valuable for their fur

The Mad King: Argaven, King of Karhide, unimpressed with Genly and terrifying in nature

View of the Tent with Stove: A look into the tent which warmed and housed the pair for months

Supplementary Sketches

Tent in the Thore Forest: A view of the camp where Genly and Estraven recover from the escape
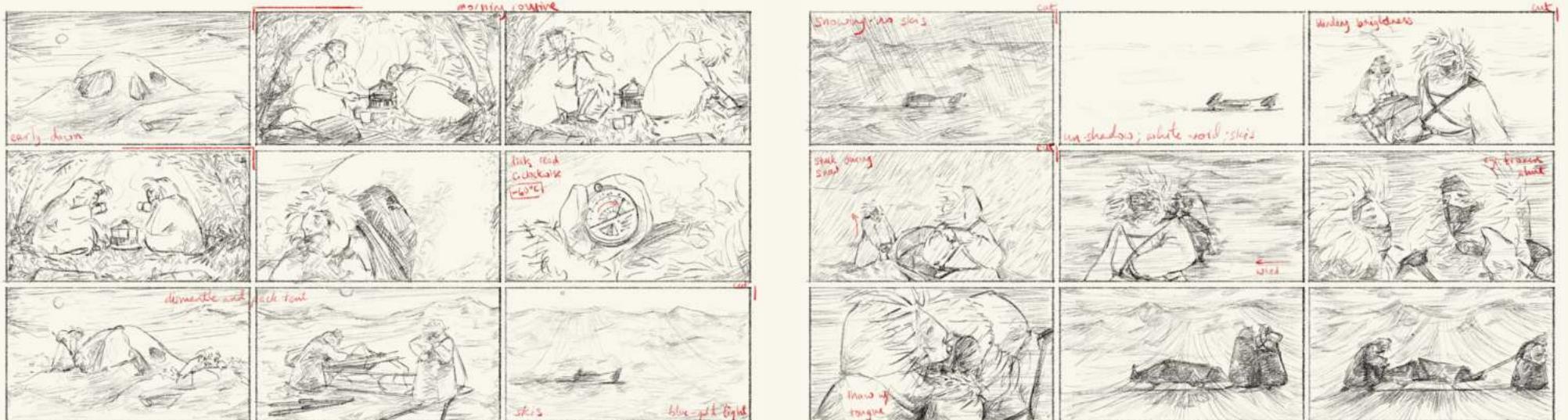

Dinner at Estraven's: The first moment of the pair's relationship that we witness

Audience with the King: the seated Genly is unable to communicate with the arrogant Argaven

Estraven's Death: The last moment that the two share

This 30-panel story sketch illustrates an imagined montage of the daily routine of our main characters as they journey across the great Gobrin Glacier in the dead of winter.

Each day, they travel 12-18 miles on foot and skis through a variety of weather conditions, facing unique challenges along the way. In this montage, we see Estraven use his mouth and tongue to thaw Genly's frozen left eye. At the end of each day, they retreat back into their tent, and begin again the next morning. The two follow this routine for over 50 days.

When the time came to represent this part of the story, I could think of no better way than through storyboards. Doing so turned out to be a wonderful idea, encouraging me further to illustrate simple panels that express important character relationships and moments.

▲ *The book's cover. The book is available for online viewing at the moment at the given link*

Compiling a Functional Art Book
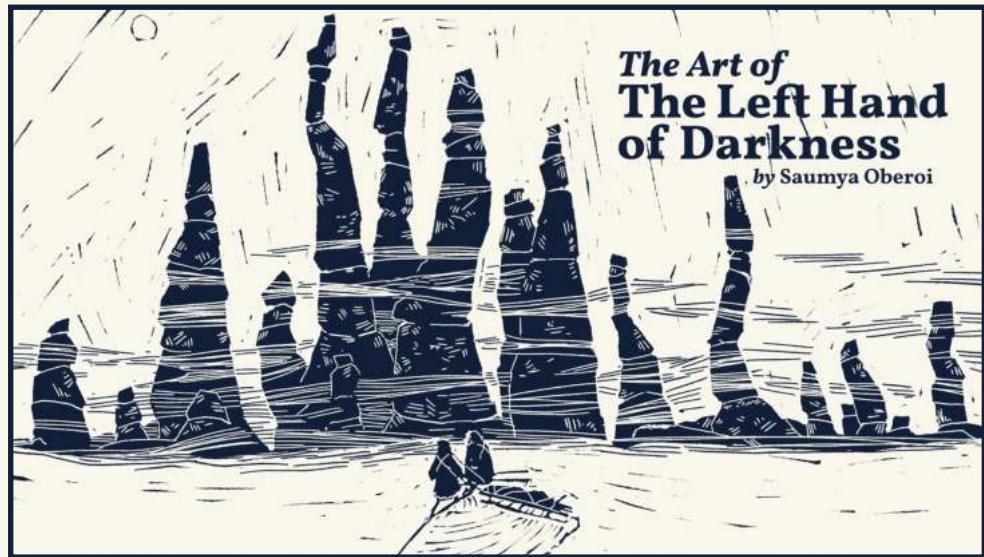
'Art-Of' books released for beloved films after the completion have been extremely popular for many years; displaying the development art that goes into the creation of wonderful animated films, these have captured my attention and admiration many times over. However, art-books are often created not just as post-release merchandise, but as functional tools during the creation of a film: they may serve to pitch a film to producers, or convey ideas from the pre-production team to the production team. In this project, I've packaged up all of my work into a final output that is designed to serve the latter of those purposes. Full of excerpts from the book that set the tone for important moments, little sketches to explain ideas for specific shots, and large prints of the artwork created for the adaptation, with this book I hope to convey with clarity the development of ideas that I've worked on for the last many months.

The book is divided into the chronological, act-based structure of the adaptation. While not all moments of the story can be represented through artwork, I've done my best to address them through text and suggest those that I couldn't draw myself. Scenes that I spent more time developing are given context by including the passages from the book that they represent. Occasionally included are many images from the moodboard, often very instrumental in helping to set the tone of a given sequence. It would have been impossible for me to create a body of work so massive so as to cover all of those ideas, but with the help of artists greater than me who have represented certain ideas better than I could have, the book is more clearly communicative and far richer in its artistic vision.

While I hope to print the book for myself and have formatted it to be printable, primary distribution during an actual production would most likely be digital; thus, the aspect ratio and decisions regarding spread layouts have been taken in a manner that makes the document as easy as possible to peruse digitally.

The book can be accessed at the following link:
https://indd.adobe.com/view/3be3f53e-a16c-43f5-b9cb-20d88de0cc5c

Reflections

This Project 2 was designed in an extremely self-indulgent way, making sure that I got to do in the span of the project only what I enjoyed and wished to do without having to worry about any other drudgery. The design of the project in that regard has succeeded, I feel — I've enjoyed the project immensely and feel that I could go on doing it for far longer than the semester timeline allows me to do. I'm especially grateful that my project proposal, unorthodox as it was, was met only with encouragement and enthusiasm from the professors around me.

I believe I've certainly improved in many ways over the course of the project; I've gained insight on processes that will last with me for a long time, I've learned methods to tackle projects far too large for comfort. The experience of taking such an intimidating project, chopping it into manageable chunks and then attempting each one by one has been an incredibly confidence-boosting exercise. While I look at my work even now as I write this and think of all the ways I could have improved it, all the things I could have added given just some more time, and all the things I wish I'd been able to develop properly, I believe the project has not been a bad attempt. With all the time I spend being critical of my work, I can't ignore how far I've come since the start of it, either.

However, a particular failure of the design of the project itself would bother me for much of its duration. Two aspects of my aspirations were incompatible — the wish to refamiliarize myself with traditional media, and the desire to output only my highest standard of work. While the use of traditional media as part of the design process and as an aid to thinking was incredibly beneficial (as in the case of my character design process), using it to create artwork that would be represented as a part of the final output was extremely daunting. My primary practice in the last few years has been digital, and my

best abilities shine through that medium. Thus, for every render, my natural go-to was the digital medium wherein I'd employ inspirations from all kinds of physical media textures and techniques. It was extremely difficult to pluck up the courage to approach a piece on physical media, because I knew that doing so would multiply the amount of time I'd spend on it while greatly reducing my chances of satisfactory success. When under a deadline, this was a very difficult trade to make. Additionally, I'm well aware that any traditional technique I'll use (especially using paint) will at the moment produce only a mediocre result due to my lack of practice, while the same concept I'd be able to execute much better and quicker, digitally.

The lesson I've gathered, then, is that exploration and practice do not work well when there are higher stakes attached to them; practice must be done freely, and expecting to both master multiple media and produce a high volume of quality output would only lead to disappointment. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the days I spent working on paper, and I take this as a lesson for the future — perhaps by spending my summer working on paper and canvas again, I'll be in a state to use those media to my satisfaction in a future project.

Most of all, however, I think the enthusiasm I've been able to hold for the entire duration of the project (even now wishing for another two months for it) tells me that I'm likely pursuing the right thing; that a career in this is indeed the dream I'd like to work towards. This reassurance alone marks the project's success for me — I'd hoped for answers about what I enjoyed doing, especially within my chosen broad field, and I think I've received some answers quite organically over the last half-year. While I have (predictably) not been able to cover all parts of the book, I think I struck a balance between depth of design (with the characters) and broad exploration (with world-building). I'll perhaps never feel like I've done full justice to the book; however, I do have to remind myself that my designs would hypothetically not exist in a vacuum. With someone to help design props, another to do layouts for cities, another to design homes and cottages and palaces, and my own contributions of character designs and storybeats, there is the opportunity for a solid production. I only hope that I get to experience that outside of a simulation, soon.

Another metric I've employed at multiple times during the project has been to show my work to people who have read the book, and hold it dear to their hearts. It's been extremely heartening to see people react positively to my artwork, as one thing that adaptations are infamous for is upsetting the fanbase of the original work. Getting wonderful responses from people who have read the book has been encouraging, and at times their critique has very greatly influenced the direction of the project. Getting a warm response from Prof. Alka Hingorani, who led a book club discussion on the novel a few months before the start of this project, had been both a delight and a relief! Of course, there are many ways to interpret the text — this is made especially clear to me as I look through the fanart made public online (which, though not much exists, has in each case been made with a deep and visible personal involvement). I cannot ever attempt or hope to satisfy every fan of the book with my designs. However, I hope that if Le Guin could have seen this work, she'd approve of the attempt to capture and honor the essence of the book. I did, after all, learn many lessons from the things she had to say about the adaptation of Earthsea. Though I'll never be able to share it with her, I'm glad to know that I've approached this entire project with the thought of making Le Guin proud; I think I've managed to learn a thing or two about an authentic approach to adaptation filmmaking.

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End.